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A Comparison of Some Major Aspects of Western Thought, Taoist Philosophy and Teilhard de Chardin

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Supervisor: Dr. Ursula King, department of Theology and Religious Studies at University of Leeds



Abstract

This thesis presents the results of research into the parallels and complementary aspects of Taoist philosophy and Teilhard de Chardin's worldview and their relationship to some important aspects of traditional and contemporary western thought.

The object of the study is to show that the world views of Taoism and Teilhard can substantially contribute to the growing awareness in the west of the universal coherence and direction of the evolutionary forces which are at work in the cosmos, on earth and in human life.

The research is developed in three parts. In Part I, thoughts on unity and distinction are investigated, focussing on the notion of duality in oneness, of differentiation in union, on the concept of psychic energy as the origin of all manifestations, and on the inner and outer aspects of the phenomenal world. Also the interconnectedness between micro and macro dimensions and the human being and nature are reviewed.

Part II looks into aspects of the phenomenon of change, emphasising the elements of time, transformation and creation. Cyclical and directional time are related to a process of evolution and to an existing, immanent and transcendent creative force, God or Tao.

Part III relates to human values, touching on some subjects affecting daily life. The ultimate transcendence of good and evil, the universal nature of the force of love and the unique and sustaining aspects of individuality and artistic expression are among the topics treated.

On all the aspects mentioned above Taoism and Teilhard complement and confirm each other in their constructive view on human life on earth.

Western thinking initially developed in the direction of radical distinctions between worldly and divine categories, a mechanistic cosmology and an alienation of humanity from nature, but is now rediscovering cosmic unity of which the human being is a part. New developments in contemporary psychology, physics and ecology can be seen as being remarkably convergent with the major insights of Taoism and Teilhard's thought.

The thesis concludes that the three inodes of thought, western thinking, Taoist philosophy and Teilhard de Chardin's world view can jointly assist contemporary humankind to find the necessary harmony and fulfilment to play a constructive role in the evolutionary course of the world.

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Preface and acknowledgements

It may be helpful for the reader of this thesis to know how I came to embark on my research and what I expect to achieve with it. I grew up in a family with wise, hard working and pragmatic parents. We had no formal connection with any religious institution and although I lived in a society where Christianity provided the general cultural background, I never had any formal introduction to the teachings of the Christian faith.

My secondary schooling occurred during the war years 1940-1945 at the Barlaeus Gymnasium, Amsterdam. After the war, my education in chemical engineering began at the Delft Institute of Technology in Holland. I chose this training because I was interested in industrial activity. In addition I was fascinated during my secondary education by the courses in chemistry revealing that matter could be transformed from one type, shape and colour into another type, shape and colour, just by mixing them in the right proportions, at the right temperature and pressure, and with the right catalyst. It aroused in me the awareness that there was a fundamentally dynamic aspect characterising our physical surroundings.

However, during my studies at Delft I began to feel uncomfortable with the basic principles of physics and mathematics necessary to integrate chemistry into an engineering science.

Although I could follow and apply intellectually the methods and exercises to formulate mathematical and mechanical relationships, I became mentally opposed to the notion that everything can be calculated, measured, predicted and controlled. I could not believe that there were no other influences that governed the course of events in this world.

In 1949, I came across a book by the French author Pierre Lecomte du Noüy called, in English translation, *Human Destiny*, which had been published in 1947. My eyes were opened to the fact that the universe, the earth and humankind are involved in a dynamic process of continuous transformation, not only materially and biologically but also spiritually. I learnt that this process follows a pattern, that there is a basic universality in the building blocks throughout all of nature; that there is a direction and that there were and are, in the process, leaps of discontinuity. I became aware of a dynamic unfolding of the total universe and of the place of our planet and humanity in this universal process. This new dimension of consciousness and its broad scope could accommodate each of the various religions, philosophies and scientific explanations that confront the human being today. There is unity in diversity at a higher level. This new dimension also accommodates mysticism as the process includes both rational and irrational elements. This new unity evokes the feeling of unknown forces in a universal interdependence of everything that happens. How can this process be translated into a coherent vision for humanity today?

The fact that I was never confronted with a specific philosophy of life or a specific religious doctrine during my education made me eager for a new kind of thinking. On the other hand, I think that my personal development and that of other contemporaries would have benefitted greatly from more education in the history of religious and scientific thinking. Such education would have to emphasise the relationships between philosophical, cultural and political developments throughout specific points in time in the course of history. This would create a deeper awareness of the kind of process we are involved in.

In 1963, I read for the first time *The Phenomenon of Man*, the English translation of *Le Phénomène Humain*, by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. I was struck by the inspiring message that humanity and our planet are engaged in a huge and dynamic process of evolution, with a direction and a purpose. The brilliant synthesis, by the Jesuit Priest Teilhard, of religion, philosophy and science within a historical and futuristic perspective was for me a revelation.

Through international business travelling, I had come across a third "revelation", the philosophical works of the early Taoists in China. I was mentally and emotionally impressed by the remarkable insight and foresight they developed about the human being, the earth and the universe. There were also intriguing parallels with Teilhard de Chardin's view, although from a different perspective in time and knowledge. It is remarkable that Teilhard, who spent twenty-three years in China as a palaeontologist, did not tap directly this vast reservoir of ancient wisdom and originality.

I became convinced that a combination of the spontaneous and intuitive visions of the Taoist philosophers and the constructive, unifying and evolutionary visions of Teilhard could give the present world citizen a wealth of new and refreshing ideas which could be brought to bear on the moral, philosophical and religious problems of the world today. It has become clear to me through many and various personal discussions, as well as industrial and social confrontations, that there is at present a great lack of such a fundamental philosophy in the approach by individuals to living, by politicians to governing, by managers to leading, by teachers to educating and by religions to guiding the life of citizens on this earth.

Many people, old and young, have unsatisfactory feelings regarding their vision of life, especially when confronted with the magnitude, intensity and exponential nature of present changes in human society. However, they have (or take) no time to think about their vision of life and they find the way the subject is presented by the churches or by science or philosophy complicated, confusing and inadequate. Still, they are, deep in their heart, yearning for an inspiring guiding vision to find new ways of fulfilment during this passage on earth.

The present thesis intends to make a contribution to the development of such a guiding vision.

During the course of undertaking this research I received valuable advice and encouragement from especially Mother Marie Ina Bergeron, FMM, PhD, Ricci Institute (Paris); Father Thomas Berry, CP, PhD, Riverdale Center for Religious Research (New York); Prof. Ewert H. Cousins, Fordham University (New York); Dr. Frits Böttcher, formerly Leiden University (Holland); Dr. Ursula King, University of Leeds; Dr. Joseph Needham, FRS, FBA, East Asian History of Science Library (Cambridge) and Father Yves Raguin, S.J. Ricci Institute and Fujen University (Taipei).

Introduction

In this study an attempt is made to detect parallels and complementary aspects between some of the major insights of Taoist philosophy and Teilhardian thinking, against the background of western thinking.

The old Chinese Taoist philosophers had some very interesting views on life and the universe based on intuitive, spontaneous and original thinking. The western world lost much of the intuition, spontaneity, and originality concerning these questions, because Christian and scientific attitudes increasingly alienated the human being from nature. Teilhard de Chardin was one of the first western thinkers to restore effective unity in the diverging forces that have come to influence western humanity. He reconciled the diversity of forces within the unity and dynamics of the evolutionary process.

Marie Ina Bergeron has made a profound study of relationships between Taoist and Teilhardian thought, presented in 1976 in her book *La Chine et Teilhard* with the emphasis on the spiritual and religious aspects. Joseph Needham, a great expert on both Taoism and Teilhard, mentions Teilhard in his monograph *Three Masters of the Tao* published by the Teilhard Centre for the Future of Man in 1979. Various experts in physics, psychology and philosophy refer to Taoist philosophy and Teilhardian insights independently in their writings. However, no studies are at present available that offer a coherent picture of the multi-disciplinary elements involved in comparing western thinking, Taoism and Teilhard and the opportunities such an approach offers for a new view on the world and its perspectives.

The present study attempts to show how western thinking developed and has recently reached new dimensions through which the present alienation between man, nature and the universe, can be reversed and how this process can benefit from Taoist and Teilhardian insights whereby both its universal and its human nature become more evident and comprehensive.

The study aims to reveal that there is a coherence between Taoist, Teilhardian and new western thinking and that these visions indicate that humanity has the potential of progressing on a clear path towards a new transformation.

A question would be why Teilhard did not recognise this coherence himself when in China. The answer seems to be that he did not spend much time on Chinese thought because he felt that eastern thinking was predominantly passive, world-negating and ignoring evolution and led to a loss of identity after death. His reserved views on eastern thinking become clear in reading some of the rare texts that exist in this respect. Teilhard wrote a summary of his viewpoint on eastern thought in 1947 in Paris¹. Others have recorded or

analysed his opinion on eastern thinking, including Taoist thinking. Helen Foster Snow, Claude Riviere, and Dominique Wang describe his opinion on eastern thinking as expressed in conversations they attended. For example, Helen Snow writes: “He totally rejected all kind of eastern philosophy and religion, and advised me not to waste my time studying it”.² From Claude Riviere’s accounts it seems that Teilhard disapproved of the Chinese identification with old conventions, and their involvement in what he called the degraded religions of the China of his days.³ According to Dominique Wang he said:

*So the orient fascinates me by its belief in the final unity of the universe. But it seems that we, the orient and me, have opposed conceptions about the relationships between the totality and its elements. For them, the One appears through suppression, for me it is born out of concentration of the many.*⁴

Ursula King has extensively described the background of Teilhard’s thinking on the “road of the east” and “the road of the west”, and concluded that eastern religions and philosophies were never assessed by him from within, on their own grounds.⁵ She writes:

*Unfortunately he did not recognise that eastern religions, particularly Taoism, but also certain aspects of Hinduism and Buddhism, possess their own world-affirming orientations.*⁶

Teilhard’s attitude should also be seen against the background of his professional work in China. In his capacity as palaeontologist he predominantly met with modern Chinese scientists, European and American colleagues and, especially during the war, the diplomatic corps. But nevertheless, in spite of his numerous criticisms, and his conviction that the west should and would take the lead, Teilhard’s opinion was that eastern and western thought should converge towards a richer worldview through the principle of diversity in union.⁷

This thesis is attempting to contribute to the convergence of Taoism and western thought.

The method used to investigate the relationships between western thought, Taoism and Teilhard is to compare some salient features, without presenting an in-depth study of historical details in terms of a history of ideas. Remaining at the level of great outlines, the three models of thought are exposed to some major issues confronting humanity, thereby revealing their parallel and complementary aspects which can contribute to a better understanding of the present and future course of humankind.

The elements of Taoist philosophy have been extracted from translations of works of Chinese philosophy from between 500 BCE and 1299 CE, such as *Tao Te Ching* (± 400 BCE), *Chuang Tzu* (± 350 BCE) *Huai Nan Tzu* (± 150 BCE) and *Meng Tzu* (350 BCE), and from

secondary sources on Chinese philosophy, such as *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* by V.V.T. Chan, *The Chinese View of Life and Chinese Philosophy* by T.H. Fang, *A History of Chinese Philosophy* by Fung Yu-lau, *Sources of Chinese Tradition* by William T. de Bary and *Science and Civilisation in China* by Joseph Needham.

Teilhardian thought is mostly derived from English translations of basic works, such as *The Phenomenon of Man* and *Le Milieu Divin*, published after his death in 1955, and also from later publications of Teilhard’s essays and letters, such as *The Heart of Matter, Science and Christ, The Future of Man, The Vision of the Past, Toward the Future* and *Human Energy*, as well as from secondary sources such as *Towards a New Mysticism, Teilhard de Chardin and Eastern Religions by Ursula King and La Chine et Teilhard* by Marie Ina Bergeron.

New ideas and visions of today in the west have been found in publications such as *Wholeness and Implicate Order* by David Bohm, *God and the New Physics* by Paul Davis, *The Evolutionary Journey* by Barbara Marx Hubbard, *Order Out of Chaos* by Ilya Prigogine, *The Awakening Earth* by Peter Russell and *A New Science of Life* by Rupert Sheldrake.

Part I, “Thoughts on Unity and Distinction”, emphasises human interpretations of spatial aspects of our planet and the universe and its philosophical consequences. The integrative and non-integrative alternatives in studying the human, the earth and the universe will be presented in the context of Taoist philosophy, Teilhardian visions and western thinking.

Part II, “Aspects of the Phenomenon of Change”, concentrates on temporal aspects and discusses how the Taoists, Teilhard and western thinking look at time, direction, transformation and evolution, and how they interpret the phenomenon of change.

Part III is concerned with “Human Values”.

It describes how spatial and temporal concepts influence spiritual and social developments in human society involving individual and collective ethics and expectations and the relationship of the human to the secular and the divine aspects of the universe.

In the Conclusion an attempt is made to synthesise the various aspects of Taoism, Teilhard and western thought into a summary of guidelines for answers on important questions regarding perspectives for the human being and humankind in the face of an imminent transformation.